

The Approaching End of the Age by H. Grattan Guinness – Part II.

Progressive interpretation. Chapter I.

Continued from [Part I. Chapter III.](#)

HUMAN COMPREHENSION OF DIVINE PROPHECY HAS BEEN, AND WAS INTENDED TO BE, PROGRESSIVE.—THREE IMPORTANT INFERENCES FROM DANIEL XII. 9.—THERE IS A BLAMELESS AND A GUILTY IGNORANCE OF THE FULFILMENT OF PROPHECY.—INSTANCES OF EACH.—REASONS FOR A PARTIAL AND TEMPORARY OBSCURITY OF PROPHECY; AND MEANS BY WHICH PROGRESSIVE COMPREHENSION OF ITS SIGNIFICATION HAS BEEN GRANTED.

WE have seen that God has been pleased to reveal the future to men only by degrees; that both in the number of subjects on which the light of prophecy has been permitted to fall, and in the clearness and fulness of the light granted on each, there has been constant and steady increase, from the pale and solitary ray of Eden, to the clear widespread beams of Daniel, and to the rich glow of the Apocalypse.

We now proceed to show that human comprehension of Divine prophecy has also been by degrees; and that in certain cases it was evidently intended by God to be so. Light to understand the prophetic word, is as much a Divine gift as that word itself, The sovereignty of God was exercised in the selection of the matters to be revealed by prophecy, the time of the revelation, and the individuals to whom, and through who, it should be communicated. And it is equally exercised in the determination of the degree to which, and the time at which, the true meaning of certain prophecies shall be unveiled, as well as in the selection of the individuals to whom the interpretation shall be given, "The Lord hath not only spoken by dreams and visions of old, but He speaketh also every day, even as often as He enlighteneth the minds of his servants, that they may be able to search out the hidden truth of his word, and bring it forth unto the world."*

* See preface to Brightman's "Revelation of the Revelation."

Prophecy, being essentially a *revelation* of the future, is of course designed to be understood; but it does not follow that it is designed to be understood immediately on its being given, nor by all who become acquainted with its announcements. The Most High has various ends to answer in predicting the future; and though we may not a/ways be able to discern his reasons for making revelations before He intends them to be comprehended, yet in some cases they are sufficiently clear.

In foretelling, for instance, the first advent of his Son, God might have been pleased to predict its *results*, in as clear and unmistakable a manner as He predicted the event itself. But plainly to have foretold the rejection and crucifixion of the Lord Jesus by Israel, would have been to interfere with the free agency of man; it must either have had the effect of preventing the crucifixion of Christ, or else have given the Jews a valid excuse for killing

the Prince of life.

Not to have foretold the actual results *at all*, on the other hand, would have been to deprive Christianity of one of its main pillars of evidence, the fact that the events of the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth *were predicted* centuries before they took place; it would have been to give some ground for present Jewish unbelief. The alternative was to *reveal* the suffering and death of Christ, but to reveal them *in such a manner* that "both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel," when banded together to carry out their own wicked wills, were quite unconscious that they were therein doing, what his hand and his counsel had "determined before to be done." This secured the good, and avoided the evil; the predictions were full and definite, and yet capable of being misunderstood: as a fact, they were not understood even by the disciples at first, nor are they understood to this day by the Jewish nation. They ought to have known Him, but "because they knew Him not, *nor yet the voices of the prophets which are read every sabbath day*, they fulfilled them in condemning Him."

Thus it is possible to possess prophecies of certain events, to read them diligently all our lives, and yet not to understand their fulfilment, even when it takes place before our own eyes. This is sinful unbelief; but there is a temporary inability to understand Divine predictions, which is entirely free from sin, which is inevitable, and indeed ordained of God.

The book of Daniel is one of the fullest revelations of the future contained in the Bible; it is unequalled for the variety and minuteness of its historical detail, and for its breadth of range, both chronological and geographical. It is closed by this remarkable injunction, (which applies, however, *mainly to the last prophecy in the book*); "But thou, O Daniel, shut up the words, and seal the book, even to the time of the end; many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased . . . none of the wicked shall understand, but the wise shall understand."

This passage seems to warrant three inferences of importance.

1. That though God for certain reasons saw fit to give this revelation of the future to Daniel at a certain date, *He did not intend it to be understood for centuries*; since, whatever may be the exact limits of the "*time of the end*," it could not include more than the course of this dispensation, and the commencement of this dispensation was several centuries distant, when Daniel wrote.

- 2, That even when in the lapse of ages the meaning of this prophecy should become apparent to some, even when "knowledge" should "be increased" and the wise understand, it was the will of God that it should still remain a dark mystery to others, that "none of the wicked should understand."

3. And thirdly that the comprehension or ignorance of this prophecy, when the time for its being understood at all arrived, would depend rather on the *moral* than on the intellectual state of those who should study it. The *wise* alone should understand it; the *wicked* should not.

The first of these inferences is confirmed by 1 Peter i, 10: "The prophets inquired and searched diligently . . . what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did signify, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow. Unto whom it was revealed that *not unto themselves, but unto us they did minister* the things . . . the angels desire to look into." Peter here alludes evidently to this very passage of Daniel who "inquired and searched diligently" about the "*time* of the events revealed to him, ("O my Lord, what shall be the end of these things?") but he lays it down as a general principle, applicable to other prophets as well, that when they "testified beforehand, of the sufferings of Christ and the glories that should follow," they ministered NOT unto themselves but unto *us*. That is, they revealed not a proximate future, interesting themselves and their brethren of the Jewish economy especially, but a more distant future, pertaining to another dispensation altogether, and *not designed to be understood till that dispensation dawned*.

The second of these inferences, that even when light was vouchsafed it would be partial, is confirmed by the words of our Lord, "it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given." "Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and revealed them unto babes."

The third inference, as to the moral character of those who receive prophetic light, is also confirmed by his words, "if any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine." It is "scoffers walking after their own lusts" who are represented as saying "where is the promise of his coming?" and as being "willingly ignorant" of the purpose of God as expressed in type, and in prophecy about the future.

It is evident therefore that there may be such a thing as a blameless ignorance of the meaning of prophecy, as well as a blameworthy and guilty ignorance of it. The prophets were not to be blamed, for not understanding what God did not intend them to understand. Jews and infidels now, are to be blamed for a guilty unwillingness to perceive, the accomplishment of Old Testament prophecies, in New Testament events.

Take as an instance of blameless ignorance, that of the apostles, even after Pentecost, as to the calling of the Gentiles, This, though in one sense a hidden mystery (Eph. iii. 9), had as a matter of fact, long been a revealed purpose of God. It had been foretold in type, in prophecy, and in promise, so that in Romans xiv. the apostle makes no less than four quotations in succession, to prove that *it was written*, and in Acts xv. James admits that "to this agree the words of the prophets." It was revealed, but not designed to be understood till a certain time, and then a special vision was sent to Peter, and a special revelation on the subject granted to Paul (Eph. iii. 3), to prepare their minds for the fulfilment of these long extant predictions, and to induce them to preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ.

Take as an instance of guilty ignorance, in the face of actual fulfilment, Jewish misunderstanding respecting the prophecies of the rejection and death of Messiah the prince. These events were, as we have seen, distinctly

revealed; He was to be "despised and rejected of men," "led as a lamb to the slaughter," "cut off yet not for Himself"; but the revelation was understood neither by "wise" nor "wicked" for a time. When the event had fulfilled and interpreted these predictions, the risen Saviour had still to address, to the two disciples going to Emmaus, that rebuke which assumes both the fact of the revelation and of their duty to understand it: "O fools and slow of heart to believe, all that the prophets have spoken; ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory?" To this day, those who have their minds still blinded through Jewish unbelief, find "a vail untaken away in the reading of the Old Testament" and cannot perceive the accomplishment of the Messianic prophecies in the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth,

Our Lord Himself revealed much that He knew his disciples did not and could not understand at the time; though He also withheld much that they were unprepared to receive. "Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up." It was not till after He was risen from the dead, that they caught the deep meaning of those pregnant words. "I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now." "The Comforter which is the Holy Ghost, shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you."

Even after the resurrection had taken place we read, "as yet they knew not the scriptures that He should rise again from the dead." They were familiar with the words "Thou wilt not leave my soul in hades, neither wilt Thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption"; but, even standing beside the empty sepulchre, the true meaning of the words failed to penetrate the mists of Jewish prejudice, which darkened their minds. After Pentecost however, when Peter had not only the inspired prophecy, but the inspiring Spirit to interpret it, how lucid and authoritative his explanation of these words: "men and brethren, let me freely speak unto you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his sepulchre is with us unto this day. . . . He being a prophet, spake of the resurrection of Christ, that *his* soul was not left in hades, neither *his* flesh did see corruption. This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses." On the same occasion he asserts that the pentecostal effusion of the Spirit, at which his audience were ignorantly marvelling, was the fulfilment of Joel's familiar but little understood prediction: "*this is that* which was spoken by the prophet Joel." How did he know it? The "untoward generation" whom he addressed thought not so, nor dreamed that they were witnessing the fulfilment of a Divine prophecy. Their account of the matter was very different; "these men are full of new wine." This proves that *spiritual enlightenment is required, for the perception of the fulfilment of prophecy, even in startling events which may be taking place before our eyes.*

It is not too much to assume that the Apocalypse of St. John was also designed to be progressively understood; that it forms no exception to the general rule, but was given *to reveal the future by degrees, and only in proportion as the understanding Of it might conduce, to the accomplishment of God's purposes, and the good of his people.* Analogy forbids us to suppose, that such a prophecy could be clear all at once, to those to whom it was first given, and it equally forbids the supposition that it was never to be

understood or interpreted at all. Can we not perceive reasons why God should in this case, act as He had so often acted before, and progressively reveal its meaning? and can we not also perceive means by which such a progressive revelation of the meaning of this prophecy, might, as time rolled on, be made?

These questions may be unhesitatingly answered in the affirmative. There are evident and weighty *reasons* why, in this prophecy above all others, the truth should not have been all at once apparent; and although this book was the last work of the last apostle, and closes the canon of Scripture, it is not difficult to see the *means* by which God Himself might unveil its signification, at an advanced period of the dispensation.

Let it be granted for a moment, (as it shall we hope be subsequently proved) that this prophecy contains an outline of all the great events of interest to the church of God, which were to happen prior to the second advent of Christ, as well as of that advent itself, and subsequent events; and that not only are the events themselves predicted, but that the actual chronology of some of them is predicted also, the duration for instance of the antichristian apostasy for a period of 1260 years, Supposing this to be the case, it is clear that God, though giving the prophecy in the apostolic age, cannot have intended it to be understood for many many subsequent generations. It was the express will of Christ that the church should be ever waiting and watching for her Lord, uncertain as to the time of His return, The Holy Spirit could therefore no more have *revealed clearly* to the early church 1260 years of apostasy prior to the return of Christ, than He could have revealed a thousand years of millennial blessedness; which as we have previously shown would have been inconsistent with his purpose.

Must we therefore conclude: *"this then cannot be the character of the Apocalypse; the same argument that proves that the millennium must succeed the advent, proves also that no long period of apostasy can be predicted as to precede it"*? No! but we conclude hence, that if such a period be revealed, it must be in a mysterious form, not intended or adapted for comprehension at the time. If an apostasy of such duration be predicted, it must be so predicted as that the true, full, meaning of the prediction, should not be obvious for centuries, and yet be evident, as soon as altered circumstances should render the understanding of the prediction, desirable for the glory of God and the good of the church.

A consideration of the problem shows, that the very same end that was to be attained by the church's ignorance of the true nature and duration of the apostasy in early ages, will in these last days be better attained by her acquaintance with both; and will lead us to admire the wisdom and the grace of Him, who in this prophecy secured for her that ignorance while it was best, and laid up in store for her that knowledge, against the time when it should, in its turn, be most beneficial.

"Known unto God are all his works from the beginning;" the real history and length of this dispensation were of course not only foreseen, but foreordained of God. For certain reasons Christ never mentioned them to his disciples, and the Holy Ghost revealed but little about them to Peter and

Paul. What were those reasons? To keep alive loving expectation of the Lord's second coming, to encourage believers to constant watchfulness, to cheer them by a present hope, and to weaken the power of temptation to earthliness and worldliness, by stamping on all things here uncertainty and evanescence (disappearance). Her ignorance of the time of the Master's return, is made a motive to "patient waiting for Christ." The first generation of believers took all the promises of his speedy return literally, and lived in the hope that they might remain to the blessed moment, and not sleep but be changed. The Holy Ghost did not deceive them to any considerable extent; in one case, where the due balance of patience and hope had been in measure lost, express revelations of intervening events were given to restore that balance, but no *periods* were assigned to these events (2 Thess. ii.); the hope was left vivid as ever, if not quite so close at hand. But *this hope was born of inexperience*; blessed and beautiful as it was, it was destined to wither away and be disappointed. The cold logic of facts proved it ill founded and mistaken, but did not render it the less sanctifying and cheering: blessed be God, there is another kind of hope, born of patience and experience, and founded not on ignorance, but on knowledge. This hope dawned on the church, as the other sank beneath the horizon, and has gradually brightened ever since; and it is a hope that shall "not make ashamed."

Now it is clear, that had God revealed the duration of the long antichristian apostasy to the early church, they would at once have been deprived of *their* holy, happy, hope. What help or consolation could the sufferers and martyrs of early days have found, in gazing forward through well-nigh two thousand years of pagan and papal persecutions, of decay and death, and spiritual corruption? The appalling prospect was in mercy hidden from their view, foreshortened almost to a point; and the advent which was to close it all, was the grand object presented to their gaze. How could they have watched for an advent two thousand years off? what present practical influence could it have exerted over their lives? Their ignorance was evidently best for them, and God in mercy did not remove it, They held in their hands the prophecy, big with the mournful secret; but they guessed not its burden, in their blissful and blameless ignorance they concluded that the "I come quickly" of their absent Lord, meant "quickly" according to human calculations. To leave them in their ignorance was the gracious purpose of God, and his motive was their comfort and sanctification.

But it is equally clear that for us, believers of the nineteenth century, the case is reversed. A knowledge of the limits of the great antichristian apostasy, would not now *deprive us of hope*, but the very contrary; in fact we need some such revelation to sustain our faith and hope to the end of the long delay; without the chronological data afforded us by the prophecies of Daniel and John, we should be in a position of fearful temptation to doubt and despair. *They were entirely ignorant of the length of the interval which we know to have occurred*, and this knowledge absolutely prevents the general promises of the nearness of the second advent, from having the same power over us that they had over them. Those statements cannot convey to us, after a lapse of well-nigh two thousand years, the impressions they conveyed to the primitive saints. They seemed to justify them in expecting the coming of Christ in their own day; but each succeeding generation would have less and

less ground for such an expectation; and when the promise was already one thousand years old, who could avoid the reflection, "since it has included one thousand years it may include another"? We, after nearly two thousand years, could not, as we read the promise, escape the conviction, that having already included two thousand years, it was perfectly possible that two thousand more were yet to come. Each century of delay would thus increase the heart-sickness of hope deferred, and the church of these last days, might well hang down her head in the sorrowful but irresistible conviction, that her redemption might still be at an immeasurable distance; she could have no well grounded hope that the Lord was in any strict sense "at hand."

Now one generation of his saints is as dear to God as another; we may be sure He did not secure the holiness and happiness of the early church, at the expense of ours, nor conceal what might be a blessing to us, because the knowledge might not have been a blessing to them. No! He provided some better thing for us, than that we should float uncertainly on the stream of time, not knowing whether we were any nearer to the future than to the past advent of Christ. He *revealed*, but revealed *in a mystery*, all the main events of this dispensation, and nearly two-thirds of its duration; He revealed them, in just such a way, as best to secure a renewal of hope that should give consolation, and revive in these last times a "patient waiting for Christ." Since *continued* ignorance of the true nature and length of this dispensation, as determined beforehand in the counsels of God, would have produced the very opposite effects designed by the permission of *temporary* ignorance, we have every reason to conclude, that God would in due time replace this latter by knowledge, and give a gradually increasing understanding of the inspired predictions.

And if it be asked *how* this could be done, since inspiration has passed away and apostolic explanations can no longer be enjoyed, we reply, by the same means by which the interpretation of earlier prophecies was given to Peter, *by their fulfilment before our eyes*, and by the teaching of the Holy Ghost, enabling us so to discern the true nature of events, as to *recognise the correspondence between them and the long familiar predictions*. When the heart is docile, and the mind free from prejudice, a comparison of inspired prediction and historic fulfilment, is sufficient to show the relation between them; to whatever extent prejudice exists, spiritual perception is blunted; where it reigns supreme, as in the case of the Jewish nation, "blindness in part has happened," and the ignorance being wilful, is necessarily a guilty ignorance, like that of Israel in apostolic days. Oh, how it behooves Christians to take heed, that they be not *thus* ignorant of the real meaning of apocalyptic prophecy!

Another observation may confirm our conviction, that it was the intention of God in the earlier parts of the Apocalypse, to conceal for a time the real nature of the events, and the true length of the periods, therein revealed. The future, which for the sake of the early church required to be hidden under a veil of mystery, was of course only the future of *this* dispensation. No prolonged interval was to be interposed between the church and her hope,—the return of her Lord; but the same concealment was not requisite as regards subsequent events and their duration. If then the principle for which

we contend be true, there will be found an air of mystery about the times and seasons mentioned prior to the advent vision, and an absence of it subsequently. This is exactly what exists. There are eight passages in the earlier part of the book, where periods of time, are named by phrases which are obviously uncommon, *not* the ordinary or natural mode of designating the period they seem to suggest, but all having an air of mystery. In the vision which immediately follows that of the advent, on the contrary, a period is six times over mentioned in *the simplest possible form*, "a thousand years." Why this difference? The real length of *this* age of sin and suffering was to be hidden for a time; but there was no need to hide the real length of the blessed age of purity, peace, and joy which is to succeed it.

We conclude then, that since God has constantly acted on this principle, of gradually revealing the meaning of his own predictions, both in the Old and New Testaments, since we can see special reasons why He should do so, and a simple means by which He could do so, in this case, and since the construction of the book affords internal evidence of such an intention, that there is the strongest presumption that the meaning of the apocalyptic prophecies was designed to become clear to the church *only by degrees*.

We conclude, that though the Apocalypse was not, like the visions of Daniel, to be supplemented by later revelations, and understood only in the light reflected back from these, yet it was to receive explanation from other sources, so that while it was a mystery in the early ages of the church, it should unfold its own meaning gradually, during the course of the dispensation, and become increasingly clear and consequently increasingly precious, in the last days.

We conclude also, that like Daniel's predictions and all other prophecy, it is not intended ever to become *self-evidently* clear, that even when understood by "the wise," its meaning will still be hidden from the world, and that consequently the true interpretation, whenever it shall arise, will have many adversaries, and be rejected with contempt by "the wicked," even while it is being fulfilled before their eyes.

These legitimate conclusions will lead us to expect *the primitive interpretation of the premillennial visions of the Apocalypse, to be the least correct*; though it might be, probably would be, right as to events *subsequent* to this dispensation. They prepare us to weigh with candour, the interpretations of later times, and forbid us to reject, on the ground of novelty, any view that attaches to these mysterious predictions a meaning worthy of Divine inspiration, and calculated to accomplish good in the church, even though it may have been unknown to the fathers, and even though it may be rejected and ridiculed by multitudes. These conclusions will lead us to expect the true interpretation *to arise* only after many many centuries of the church's history had rolled away, when the bright hope of early days had quite died out; and to *have the effect* of quickening the church afresh to the patient waiting for Christ. But we should expect also that the true clue to the mysteries of the Apocalypse, once discovered, would not be immediately applied correctly; so that it would never practically have the effect of leading the church to think the Lord's return a very distant event, however much it might, theoretically considered, seem likely to do so. In other

words, that God would not suddenly illuminate these predictions and so translate the church at a bound from perfect ignorance to perfect knowledge of the fore-appointed length and character of this dispensation; but that He would *enlighten her darkness gradually*, by leaving a measure of obscurity till towards the close; would allow her still, as at the first, to expect the great consummation long before its predestined date, and sustain her by revealing fresh grounds of hope, based on more accurate apprehension of the truth, as each erroneous anticipation was disappointed by the event. We shall consequently expect to find every generation of saints, after the true key to the book has once been found, *making advances on the last, and the discrepancies existing between their views will not stumble us, or lead us to reject them all as ungrounded*. We shall trace the vein of truth growing wider and deeper; we shall watch the ever brightening dawn of the true light; and far from deeming this gradual discovery of the meaning of the apocalyptic prophecies, with its consequent inevitable discrepancies, a proof that they have no meaning, or none worth seeking, we shall accept it as a proof, of the purpose of God to act, still, as ever, on the principle of progressive revelation.

Now on reviewing the history of apocalyptic interpretation we find that the early church were right in their interpretation of the visions which follow the second advent, they understood correctly, that which it was not the purpose of God to *conceal* from them. *All the primitive expositors and teachers were premillennialists*.. With the exception of Origen, who spiritualized everything, and of a few who denied the inspiration and apostolicity of the book, all the early fathers up to the time of Constantine, including Justin Martyr, Ireneus, Tertullian, Hippolytus, Victorinus, Methodius, Lactantius, held that the first resurrection of Revelation xx. was a literal resurrection, prior to a personal reign of Christ on earth. The expectation of a spiritual millennium, to precede the coming of the Lord, grew up only in the more corrupt ages of the church, after her union with the world in the days of Constantine.*

* Elliott, "Horae," vol. iv., p. 306.

As to the previous predictive visions of the book, the numerous commentaries on the whole, and the almost innumerable explanations of parts of it, which have appeared, may be arranged in three distinct classes, which for convenience' sake have been denominated Preterist, Futurist, and Presentist schemes of interpretation; each of these classes embraces a great variety of expositions, but the interpretations of each class have a *fundamental* resemblance to each other, and differ *fundamentally* from those of the other two.

The first or PRETERIST scheme, considers these prophecies to have been fulfilled in the downfall of the Jewish nation and the old Roman empire, limiting their range thus to the first six centuries of the Christian era, and making Nero Antichrist.

This scheme originated with the Jesuit Alcazar towards the end of the sixteenth century; it has been held and taught under various modifications by Grotius, Hammond, Bossuet, Eichhorn and other German commentators, Moses

Stuart, and Dr. Davidson. It has few supporters now, and need not be described more at length. Moses Stuart bases it on the denial of the very principle for which we are contending; he takes it for granted that the writer had an "*immediate* object in view when he wrote the book," and that the *original readers of the Apocalypse understood* it; and argues that it must therefore treat of such matters as they could understand. But his only reason for this assertion is that *he cannot conceive* how "a sensible man" could write a book "which would be unintelligible to those to whom it was addressed;" and he proceeds to admit that there is no *evidence* extant to show that the early Christians understood it. Further on he says that "very soon after this age, it was so interpreted that grave obstacles were raised to the reception of the book as canonical." And looking back from the end of the eighth century, after reviewing all the previous expositors of Revelation, he says "we find that no real and solid advances were yet made" towards a satisfactory explanation of the book. Thus he assumes that its first readers were intended to understand it, and *assumes* that they did do so, while admitting that there is not the slightest *proof* to support either assumption, and that the light if ever possessed, was very quickly lost. His work evinces much learning but little spirituality, and treats the Apocalypse too much as a merely human production; his views are happily not shared by many.

The second or PRESENTIST interpretation, is that historic Protestant view of these prophecies, which considers them to predict the great events to happen in the world and in the church, from St. John's time to the coming of the Lord; which sees in the Church of Rome, and in the Papacy, the fulfilment of the prophecies of Babylon and of the Beast, and which interprets the times of the Apocalypse on the year-day system.

This view originated about the eleventh century, with those who even then began to protest, against the growing corruptions of the Church of Rome. It grew among the Waldenses, Wickliffites, and Hussites, into a consistent scheme of interpretation, and was embraced with enthusiasm and held with intense conviction of its truth, by the Reformers of the sixteenth century. In their hands it became a powerful and formidable weapon, to attack and expose the mighty apostasy, with which they were called to do battle. From this time it spread with a rapidity that was astonishing, so that ere long it was received as a self evident and fundamental truth, among Protestant churches everywhere. It nerved the Reformers of England, France, Germany, Switzerland, Denmark, and Sweden, and animated the martyrs of Italy and Spain; it decided the conscientious and timid adherents of the Papacy to cross the Rubicon, and separate from the so called Catholic Church; and it has kept all the Reformed churches since, from attempting reunion with Rome.

It was held and taught by Joachim Abbas, Walter Brute, Luther, Zwingle, Melancthon, Calvin, and all the rest of the Reformers; by Bullinger, Bale, and Foxe; by Brightman and Mede, Sir Isaac and Bishop Newton, Vitringa, Daubuz and Whiston, as well as by Faber, Cunningham, Frere, Birks and Elliott; no two of these may agree on all questions of minor detail, but they agree on the grand outline, and each one has added more or less to the strength and solidity of the system, by his researches. During the last seven centuries this system has been deepening its hold on the convictions of the

Christian church, and has been embraced by some of her wisest and best guides and teachers. It originated with martyrs and confessors, exerted a sanctifying and strengthening influence over those who received it; it tended to revive the hope of the premillennial coming of the Lord, which had long lain in abeyance, leading naturally to many false anticipations of that event, which have been disproved by time, as well as to many very remarkable approximations to the truth, as to the time of other events, It met *of course* with intense and bitter opposition from the church it branded as Babylon, and the power it denounced as Antichrist, and to this day is rejected by all who in any way maintain or defend these, as well as by some who do neither.

The third or FUTURIST view, is that which teaches that the prophetic visions of Revelation, from chapters iv. to xix., prefigure *events still wholly future* and not to take place, till just at the close of this dispensation. It supposes "an instant plunge of the apocalyptic prophecy, into the distant future of the consummation." * This view gives the literal Israel a large place in the Apocalypse, and expects a personal infidel Antichrist, who shall bitterly oppress the saints for three years and a half, near the date of the second advent, thus interpreting *time* as well as much else in the Apocalypse, *literally*.

* Elliott, iv., 561.

This view is, in a *certain* sense, the most ancient of the three for the primitive fathers agree in several of these latter points. In its present form however it may be said to have originated at the end of the sixteenth century, with the Jesuit Ribera, who, moved like Alcazar, to relieve the Papacy from the terrible stigma cast upon it by the Protestant interpretation, tried to do so, by referring these prophecies to the distant future, instead of like Alcazar to the distant past. For a considerable period this view was confined to Romanists, and was refuted by several masterly Protestant works. But of late years, since the commencement of this century, it has sprung up afresh, and sprung up strange to say among Protestants. It was revived by such writers as the two Maitlands, Burgh, Tyso, Dr. Todd, the leaders of the "Brethren" generally, and by some Puseyite expositors also. It is held thus by *extreme* parties; by those who though Protestants, are ashamed of the Reformation, speak of it as an unwarrantable schism, and verge as closely on Rome as is possible; and by those, who though Protestants, deem the glorious Reformation to have stopped grievously short of the mark, and see so much of Babylon still, in the Reformed churches, that they refuse to regard them as having come out of Babylon, or as victors over Antichrist. It is held under a greater variety of modifications than the other two, no two writers agreeing as to what the symbols *do* prefigure, but all agreeing that they do *not* prefigure anything that has ever yet taken place.

Those who hold this view support it, among other arguments, by the authority of the primitive church. They say: "the fathers had apostolic tradition; they had no controversial bias; their opinion ought to have great weight; the historical interpretation was unknown in the church for one thousand years or more; our view is the original view of the early Christians. *They* expected that Antichrist would be an individual man; *so do we*. *They* expected him to be

an infidel atheistic blasphemer, not a Christian bishop; so do we. They believed his tyranny would last three years and a half immediately prior to the coming of Christ; so do we. They took the days, weeks, and months of the Apocalypse literally; so do we."

Now we readily admit this agreement (though indeed it is by no means so perfect as is implied*), and reply that herein lies a *very strong presumption against the Futurist scheme. It is a return to that early interpretation of the prophecies, which was necessarily defective and erroneous, seeing it was not the purpose of God, to permit a premature comprehension of the nature and length of this dispensation.* It is a view which rejects the light as to the purposes of God, which experience of the providence of God has afforded. It exalts the impressions of ignorance, above the ripe results of mature knowledge, and claims prestige for primitive views, on points where posterior views are necessarily preferable. It treats inexperience as wisdom, and despises as folly the wisdom acquired by eighteen hundred years' experience, of the most wonderful providential dealings of God. It recommends those who are of full age to return to the opinions of childhood, forgetting that errors excusable in children are inexcusable in men. The early church knew nothing of the marvellous ecclesiastical phenomena with which we are acquainted; their ignorance of the true scope of the prophecy was unavoidable; we have seen the awful apostasy that has lorded it for more than twelve hundred years in the church of God; similar ignorance in us is without excuse, for experience ought to teach. *The Futurist view denies progressive revelation,* and asserts that the early church understood the Apocalypse better than the church of after-times, which is contrary to the analogy of Scripture, and to the apparent purpose of God.

* See Elliott, "Horae: Apocalyptic," vol. iv., p. 612.

Two main systems of interpretation of this final revelation of Scripture, are then before us: which is likely to be the true? The one characterized the infancy of the church, the other was the offspring of mature experience: the one sprang up amid utter ignorance of the actual purpose of God; the other in view of his accomplished providence: the one can never be brought to any test; the other at every point exposes itself to critical examination; the one was and is held by the apostate and persecuting church of Rome; the other by multitudes of confessors and a glorious army of martyrs: the one leaves us to form our own opinion of the greatest fact in the history of the church, the papal system of ecclesiastical corruption and tyranny; the other gives us God's infallible and awful judgment about it: the one was never more than a barren speculation; the other has been and is, a *mighty power for good*: the one leaves us in dismal doubt as to our place in the prophetic calendar; the other makes us lift up our heads, to catch the glow of the coming sunrise.

The presumption is surely *against* the modern revival of the primitive view. A return to primitive *doctrine* is good; no progressive revelation of the dogma of justification by faith, for instance, was to be expected; innovation in questions of faith is condemned; we are "earnestly to contend for the faith once delivered to the saints." But prophecy is not doctrine, and its very nature implies that it must be capable of receiving elucidation from the course of providence. *The Protestant historical system of apocalyptic*

interpretation is based on this fact, and has consequently a strong presumption in its favour. But presumption is not proof; and the question is of such importance that a fuller examination must now be attempted.

Three main points require to be settled before we can hope to arrive at the meaning of the prophecies of the Revelation.

1. Is the Apocalypse to be understood literally? and if not, on what principle is it to be interpreted?
2. Is it a fulfilled or partially fulfilled prophecy? or does it refer to events still future?
3. Is it a Christian or a Jewish prophecy? That is, does it bear to the church, and to her fortunes in the world, the same relation that earlier prophecy bore to Israel, and to their fortunes in the world? These questions will be considered, in the chapters which follow.

Continued in [Part II. Progressive interpretation. Chapter II.](#)